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The Multilingual Classroom: New Rhetorical Frontiers in L2 Writing?

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Abstract

This paper presents some considerations on teaching L2 rhetorical conventions in university-level multilingual classrooms. It is claimed that if L2 students need to acquire versatile writing skills in L2 to be given a voice in the discourse milieu of the receiving society, they should also have the right to preserve their L1 cultural perspective. Drawing from Mao's notion of "creative heteroglossia" (2004), emphasis is placed on the positive transfer of knowledge and skills from L1 to L2, and on the creation of a rhetorical space shaping a "new culturally combined persona" (p. 53). The concepts of linguistic, academic and cultural literacy are briefly discussed, and reference is made to the institutional and pedagogical challenges of creating such new rhetorical space for L2 students.

Introduction

"La rhétorique est [...] l'art du discours" writes Reboul (1984, p. 6). Developed in the Ancient world, this *bene dicendi scientia*, as it was probably known at that time, was a theory focusing on persuasion and the construction of effective speech (Fahnestock & Secor, 2002, p. 178). Among the numerous principles of Aristotelian rhetoric, the ideas of *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* are certainly crucial to the construction of persuasive reasoning. The orator must be aware of "three kinds of appeals, those stemming from the character of the speaker (*ethos*), those from the nature of the audience (*pathos*), and those from the material of the case itself (*logos*)" (Fahnestock & Secor, 2002, p. 180). Nowadays, the interest of rhetoricians has partially converged towards other areas, exploring new discursive dimensions. Even so, the three cornerstones of ancient rhetoric have been preserved.

When scholars use the term 'rhetoric' in contemporary applied linguistics, they usually refer to "discourse-level organizational patterns rather than [...] to a constellation of techniques for persuasion", as in the Aristotelian perspective (Casanave, 2004, p. 27). Thus, there has been a major shift in the focus of investigation. Modern scholars following in the footsteps of Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian tend to concentrate on the order and organization of phrases and paragraphs within texts. If they are not only rhetoricians but contrastive rhetoricians, then they also try to examine these

features in terms of their cultural specificity and compare samples of writing and argument cross-culturally, in order to observe what *dispositio* can reveal about logic, values, and human relationships in different linguistic environments (Casanave, 2004). Hence, the underlying assumption of contemporary contrastive rhetoricians is that “rhetoric [...] is not universal [...] but varies from culture to culture and even from time to time within a given culture” (Kaplan, 1966, p. 2).

On the one hand, this renewed interpretation of *l’art du discours* has opened the doors to research not only in the field of applied linguistics but also in discourse and genre analysis, pragmatics, ethnography, psychology, pedagogy, cultural and historical studies, and so forth. On the other hand, however - in tribute to the Greek origins of this discipline - the intercultural dimension of contrastive rhetoric seems to have opened Pandora’s box. Today, the pedagogical implications of contrastive rhetoric are more obvious and challenging than ever, and continue to stimulate animated debates. Conveying ways of perceiving the world, teaching societal hierarchies and illustrating the cultural underpinnings that are embedded in one language to speakers of other languages - and therefore bearers of different cultures and values - are extremely delicate tasks. In multilingual environments, teachers may seriously influence their L2 students’ intellectual and personal growth, as well as their integration in the receiving society. This responsibility should not be underestimated, as it might provoke serious effects, if the teacher is not fully aware of his/her influential role. That said, what was left at the bottom of Pandora’s box, after all its content had vanished? Hope. Intercultural exchange in the classroom is certainly achievable and it may represent a source of inestimable value for those who experience it.

Some critical debates in contrastive rhetoric

Robert Kaplan was one of the first scholars to apply contrastive rhetoric research to the field of pedagogy. In 1966, Kaplan published a chapter on teaching composition to non-English speaking students. He analyzed about 600 essays written by ESL students from diverse linguistic backgrounds and focused on the distribution and composition of paragraphs (Kaplan, 1966). He concluded that “each language and each culture has a paragraph order unique to itself” (p. 14). According to Kaplan, this order concealed an equally unique logical system. Hence, not being familiar with L2 rhetorical patterns could result in ‘illogical’ writing: “cultural patterns inherent in the rhetorics of different languages cause L2 students to write in ways that are not native-like”, and which, therefore, do not seem logical to native speakers of L2 (Casanave, 2004, p. 30). The underlying assumption for this claim lies in the notion of negative transfer: the detrimental interference of L1 habits on the acquisition and successful mastering of L2 habits. In other words, L1 discourse norms and writing conventions would be erroneously transferred to writing in L2 by L2 learners, who then produce non-native-like compositions. This

concern was discussed by Kaplan, who stressed the importance of identifying appropriate teaching strategies to help students effectively master English as well as its 'logical' system (Kaplan, 1966).

Kaplan's pioneering work was acknowledged and greatly appreciated by the academic community, yet it was not immune to criticism (Casanave, 2004). Early works in contrastive rhetoric apparently overlooked fundamental variables, such as sociolinguistic features, L2 proficiency levels, situational contexts and communicative intents, which may significantly affect the dynamics taking place in multilingual classrooms (Casanave, 2004; Kowal, 1998). However, the most critical comments pointed to ethnocentric attitudes: first, in terms of the culturally and academically biased expectations of the researchers – albeit a quite understandable human component - and second, in terms of the notion of linearity of English expository prose vis-à-vis non-English prose, and its alleged 'logicality' (Kowal, 1998).

The interesting quest for culture-specific rhetorical patterns has pervaded most subsequent and contemporary research in the field of contrastive rhetoric. On this topic, however, Kubota (1997) warned about the dangers of reducing cultures to a set of fixed conventions, starting from the assumption that cultural norms "are not unitary and homogeneous" but rather "a dynamic site of struggle" (p. 464). Indeed, generalization may lead to the creation of stereotypical portraits of the readership and, as a result, to the teaching of rigid and misleading L2 writing principles.

In commenting on Hind's (1987) assumptions about the unique and conflicting nature of Japanese and English readers' expectations, Kubota (1998) documented that the results of the reader's compliance with what would be 'standard' expectations are not that predictable. In her findings, she reported that some Japanese students received low grades because they "were apparently misled by the notion that Japanese readers prefer inductive essays", while their raters, although Japanese, showed different preferences (p. 86). Similarly, Connor's (1987) survey of academic compositions written in four different L1 (i.e.: American English, British English, Finnish and German) showed that some of the highest-rated essays did not conform to the 'default' rhetorical norms of argumentative writing and, therefore, to what it was believed were the expectations of the raters.

The highest-rated compositions displayed alternative patterns of argumentation that deviated from the accepted L1 conventions. Nonetheless, these patterns proved to be extremely effective in terms of credibility and persuasive strength. Casanave (2004) points out that "responses to writing are deeply personal and individual" (p. 50), therefore scholars should be careful in stating absolute truths about the reader's expectations and in talking about a prototypical L2 reader. In turn, L2 writers should not rely on the assumed uniformity of their readership, as they might well be disappointed and fail in their

communicative intents. After all, if there is no culturally unique way of writing, is there a culturally unique way of reading?

This delicate balance between reader and writer, and their role in the intercultural communicative process, is still at the heart of numerous disputes trying to assess whose responsibility it is when intercultural communication fails. Is it deficient writing or faulty reading? Is it the writer's inadequate knowledge of the L2 world and language or the reader's inadequate interpretation of, or problematical adaptation to, non-native-speaker styles?

Casanave (2004) maintains that "in all the languages, the role of the reader is very important" and that the writer must be aware of the fact that his/her audience "will contribute to the communicative exchange drawing from the rules as well as their shared knowledge of cultural practices and values" (p. 35). An important dimension of contrastive rhetoric emerges from this statement: effective writing needs, to a certain extent, shared cultural awareness between the reader and the writer. In other words, it needs shared discourse norms or, at least, the ability/willingness to understand the cultural traits of a given linguistic community. However, this does not necessarily imply that such knowledge must be entirely L2-related. The relevance that the reader's awareness of the writer's 'non-nativeness' might have in successful communication should also not be underestimated (Casanave, 2004): "the shared discourse community is the space that surrounds the text, which is placed at the intersection of the background of the writer and the reader" (Matsuda, 1997, p. 54). Hence, as long as a common space of knowledge is shared by the two actors, some sort of intercultural exchange is certainly achievable. What is valuable, however, is that this space might not require a complete transfer from one side to the other of the communicative path. A conciliating halfway meeting point could be the ideal solution.

Linguistic, academic and cultural literacy

Atkinson & Ramanathan (1995) explain that when L2 learners enter the university system, they are expected to have native-like awareness of "patterns for structuring discourse, [...] norms of communicative behavior, and some understanding of writing [...] as a [...] self-defining activity" (p. 563), not to mention a relatively high degree of language proficiency. In other words, linguistic, academic and cultural literacy are taken for granted. Needless to say, the reality of the multilingual classroom is rather different: some students may have poor proficiency in the L2; others may not have acquired adequate writing skills, not even in their L1; and some students, especially immigrants, may not be familiar with the receiving culture and its communicative values.

In terms of linguistic competence, I have already mentioned how the proficiency factor has sometimes been overlooked in analyzing and assessing L2 learners' writing skills. "Language ability is often

confused with intellectual ability”, claim Fu & Townsend (1998, p. 128), and students are those who suffer the consequences of this misinterpretation. Adequate linguistic literacy is a fundamental step towards L2 students’ success in writing. Whilst low proficiency in the L2 is a frequent problem in multilingual classrooms, this type of competence will not be discussed in this paper, as it can only be acquired through intensive linguistic training and exposure to the L2.

In terms of writing skills, it is important to remember that writing is a process that entails a wide array of different competences. Teaching writing skills to non-native speakers is one of the main concerns of today’s research, given the growing linguistically diverse population attending educational institutions world-wide. However, this concern should not exclude native speakers. According to Swales and Luebs (2002), “there are widespread perceptions that many native-speaker graduate students also struggle with their academic writing” (p. 150). If it is true that successful writing in L2 can be achieved once the writer becomes familiar with L2 culture and conventions, what Swales and Luebs report should not occur. Native speakers presumably possess all necessary cultural schemata to produce effective writing, yet, they apparently struggle anyway. This highlights the importance of teaching genre conventions.

Kubota (1977) emphasizes that “researchers should be aware that rhetorical structures are influenced by a genre that serves a set of communicative purposes of discourse” (p. 473). In other words, even within the same linguistic community, there is no unique way to write and each way conforms to specific guidelines and purposes. Learning to write is a multidirectional process and the direction to be taken depends on the communicative goal and context. “A unique style found in some texts may fulfill a very specific, but not general, purpose of discourse” (p. 473); for instance, business writing differs from academic writing, emails from paper correspondence, and newspaper reports from story-telling. Naturally, these are only macro-genre categories responding to macro discourse norms. At a deeper level, email correspondence can indeed be analyzed by looking at the discourse patterns in the micro-genre of business email correspondence and, more deeply, in the nano-genre of payment requests. Similarly, email correspondence can be investigated by considering the micro-genre of university-level student-to-teacher email correspondence and, for example, the nano-genre of course admission. Finally, newspaper reports could be analyzed in terms of the discourse norms displayed in crime news or society news.

The examples of textual genres are obviously countless and stretch over a variety of levels. Fox (1994, p. 10) points out that what students may need to learn to succeed in their university path is what the institution expects of them: the discourse conventions of the genres they are confronted with in the university environment, and which they may eventually need to use in the ‘real’ world. Whatever their first language, it is important that students acquire the tools to become academically literate, since university is the context where

the micro-genres they are trying to master are first applied. Thus, the acquisition of genre-specific conventions should be taken into greater consideration when researching the causes of students' writing difficulties.

Since "a genre is a socially sanctioned type of communicative event" (Kramsch, 1998, p. 62), social and cultural components obviously play a crucial role in writing. This introduces the third constituent: cultural literacy. Fu & Townsend (1998) explain that when L2 students engage in the writing process, they try to interact with an audience "with whom they share little understanding of accepted writing styles, criteria for good writing, literary traditions, or aesthetic tastes" (p. 128). In the multilingual classroom, the recurrent problem is that differences in linguistic and cultural backgrounds generate gaps in the communicative process. As Steinman (2003) emphasizes, teachers "focus immediately on where the student is going rather than on where he or she is coming from" (p. 88), and often take cultural assumptions for granted. This one-dimensional attitude can have profound repercussions on L2 students and on their academic performance, as it could lead "to consternation among students who make sense of school activities in divergent ways" than the teacher's own (Fu & Townsend, 1998, p. 132). This is why L2 students also need to acquire a certain degree of cultural literacy.

To help L2 students gain the appropriate cultural schemata, the teacher can provide them with a ballpark of reader's expectations and discourse conventions that are generally assumed in L2 culture within the genre being studied (the L2 rhetorical theme). Even though "the readership of academic writing is becoming as diverse as the authorship" (Steinman, 2003, p. 85) - and, as it has been underlined, generalizing is not productive -, L2 students need to have a point of reference, an L2 rhetorical theme, so as to be able to speculate about possible deviations from the rule and consciously opt for L2 rhetorical rhemes, that is, discourse choices that do not necessarily meet the native readers' expectations. This greatly empowers L2 writers: only when they know how to conform, can they critically decide and take responsibility for deviating from this norm and manifesting their "agency in discourse" (Canagarajah, 2004, p. 267).

Casanave (2004) puts the onus on the teacher: "if students have no idea what their readers expect, then it is the job of teachers to help make these expectations explicit" (p. 51). In doing so, a comparison between L1 and L2 rhetorical principles and written models would be desirable, at least in classrooms where learners share the same L1 (Casanave, 2004; Kramsch, 1998; Jenkins & Hinds, 1987; Connor, 1987). The effects of this approach could be beneficial: firstly, this could help students observe new patterns and learn new styles, and could help them become familiar with the L2 textual production specific to a given genre; secondly, this could facilitate their understanding of L2 discourse norms, as they could draw from the norms of their own L1; thirdly, this could help teachers tactfully deal with the issue of intercultural diversity.

On this delicate topic, Kubota (1997) warns about the risks of perpetuating stereotypes: “students themselves [may] hold overly simple beliefs about their L1 cultures and rhetorics” and “teachers, too, may not know enough about rhetorical conventions in students’ own languages to counter [...] stereotypes effectively” (p. 45). Moreover, when an ‘imperial’ language (e.g.: English, French, etc.) is one of the counterparts, issues of racism and ethnocentrism may arise. As Fox (1994) explains, “students may be insulted when we bring up the subject of ‘difference’, for which they read ‘deficiency’. We have to tread carefully” (pp. 10-11).

It is certainly not desirable to perpetuate stereotypes, but “it may, if students only need to pass a particular kind of writing test” (Casanave, 2004, p. 52). Motivations and practical needs should not be overlooked when teaching writing conventions: students’ rationales for learning to write effectively in their L2 might be short-term and purely instrumental (e.g.: passing an exam, obtaining a job, etc.). At the same time, however, it cannot be taken for granted that the writing expertise acquired in the L2 during the university career will not prove useful in situations other than the coming exam or the imminent job application. Personal and professional dynamics in one’s life are indeed unpredictable and students should be made aware of this. Teachers will have to be ambitious enough, for the benefit of their students, not to neglect important aspects of intercultural instruction for the sake of the learners’ immediate fruition of writing skills. In other words, they should be able to find the right balance between teaching what is needed in the university setting, and what, in the long run, may be needed in life and in the professions.

L2 writers’ “Creative Heteroglossia”

The ‘acculturation’ process involved in the acquisition of cultural literacy should not necessarily involve a rhetorical shift from L1 to L2: “how realistic is it to regularly expect or demand of our NNS [non-native speaker] students that they basically become someone else?” (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999, p. 56). Interestingly, Steinman suggests the existence of two or more different sets of writing styles: a “default” style, meaning the student’s own, drawing from his/her L1 cultural tradition, and an L2 style, suitable for different circumstances and expectations in L2 society (Steinman, 2003, p. 86). Yet, what is a student’s own style? Is it reasonable to think that writing styles and norms do not merge in contact situations, especially when a NNS student strives to be part of the receiving society?

On this topic, Thatcher (2004) illustrates the notion of “border rhetoric”, a type of rhetoric that draws on both rhetorical backgrounds. Following the same trend, Mao (2004) postulates the creation of a new social face in L2 learners. The meeting point between two different rhetorical styles shapes a “new culturally combined persona”, who acquires a new identity in the L2 context and who “is not afraid of differences” (p. 53). Expanding on the Bakhtinian notion of heteroglossia, the multiplicity of voices and world views in language,

Mao also introduces the concept of “creative heteroglossia”, a desirable scenario in situations of “rhetorical borderlands” (p. 54).

Starting from the assumption that multilingualism is a valuable resource for the individual, the instructor's intervention in teaching writing conventions should be linguistically and culturally additive, rather than subtractive (Steinman, 2003, p. 86). It is “by acknowledging and confronting the conflicts in discourses and identities that students can find their voice” (Canagarajah, 2004, p. 287), a voice that must not be constrained nor necessarily reduced to monolingualism or monoculturalism. In this perspective, L2 students could certainly benefit from an in-between pedagogical approach. In terms of versatility and academic verve, Fu and Townsend (1998) maintain that “a bilingual writer [...] writes with interwoven bilingual and bicultural qualities” (p. 132). L2 students could be seen as having a broader range of expressive and interpretative means at their disposal, and such creative heteroglossia should be encouraged in class (Steinman, 2003, p. 85). Moreover, in terms of self-esteem, L2 writers could learn to perceive their difficulties in composition as a lack of involvement in the target discourse space, rather than as individual deficiencies. Finally, the whole classroom environment would be improved and enriched by exchanges of experiences and culturally divergent points of view. In Cummins' ideal view (2001), “a community of sharing is created in the classroom: identity is being negotiated in ways that motivate students to express their growing sense of self and participate actively in the learning process” (pp. 129-130).

Now, the real dilemma is the societal and institutional support with respect to this ambitious goal of promoting voices and discourse patterns that do not fully comply with the standard ones. Canagarajah (2004) wonders whether there is “room for writers to negotiate an independent voice in academic discourse” (p. 268). This is a legitimate question. After all, it is true that violations of the established norms may prevent an L2 writer from having his/her work published in academic journals, or passing a university exam in the receiving society. Steinman raises the bar and addresses this question to the Western world: “can the Western academic community be creative, be more tolerant, set aside its restrictions and conventions to consider alternate modes?” (Steinman, 2003, p. 87). More provocatively, he also raises the ethical concern of mutilating L2 student's writing potential: “we [...] may be doing our students a disservice in preparing them to write only for Western audiences by assuming that the academic audience in the West [...] cannot learn to become accustomed to a variety of discourse styles” (p. 85).

Above all, are teachers ready to support this? And not only language or writing teachers, but also instructors of other subjects? Although they are often part of a greater system that does not appear to be ready for a plurality of communicative styles (Fox, 1994, p. 107), teachers benefit from direct contact with L2 students and can certainly help alleviate the strain that some learners might experience when trying to feel culturally and intellectually accepted. Ostler (1987, p.

169) suggests that teachers should first appreciate the different rhetorical traditions of different cultures, they should undergo themselves a cultural transformation enabling them to become teachers “with pluralistic world views and diverse human values” (Fu & Townsend, 1998, p. 132). Atkinson and Ramanathan (1995) propose hiring primarily teachers who have “an interest or background in teaching NNS” and who are trained to take on the challenge of teaching a multilingual class (p. 564). Steinman (2003), on the other hand, calls for a greater effort from all existing teachers, who should be prepared to come forward and put their cultural flexibility to the test by trying to write in a style other than the style generally associated with their L1. In this way, they would have a chance to see things from the point of view of their NNS students and identify the most critical phases of the writing and rhetorical awareness-building processes. This may even involve learning a foreign language. Indeed, in discussing the value of intercultural training, Ife (2005) claims that “unless individuals have attempted to articulate, or recode, their own perception of reality in terms of another language, they will never truly understand the experience of someone who [has] to do just that” (pp. 295-6).

Final Remarks

The field of contrastive rhetoric presents a fascinating challenge, especially to teachers who are particularly sensitive to issues of multiculturalism and cross-cultural communication. Several paths of investigation have been explored to date; nonetheless, no ideal solution has been identified that will guarantee unproblematic teaching of L2 rhetorical conventions to NNS students. On this topic, Casanave (2004) explains that “the [contrastive rhetoric] debate continues to interest L2 writing scholars because it remains unresolved and because the ideas on which it is based continue to be meaningful for teachers and students of L2 writing” (p. 42).

The key aspect to consider in planning pedagogical approaches and developing teaching strategies for L2 writing is the notion of transfer of skills and discourse norms from L1 to L2. Kubota (1998) claims that “studies on cognitive aspects of writing have identified L1-L2 positive transfer of cognitive abilities”, and adds that “patterns of the composing process in L1 and L2 are generally similar” (p. 73). Hence, a variety of intellectual activities, including writing, would demonstrate positive transfer from L1 to L2. However, the focus of this transfer should be shifted from the cognitive process to the written product, in order to consider this phenomenon in a socio-cultural perspective. As Matsuda (1997) explains, the academic community displays an obsessive focus on negative transfer. After all, is it really that negative? Is the natural interference of L1 conventions in L2 writing that detrimental for L2 students and for their achievements in L2 society? Some studies demonstrated that academic compositions ‘violating’ L2 accepted rhetorical norms and frustrating shared culture-specific expectations may be successful anyway, if not the most successful instances of writing in a class .

Nowadays, non-conformism is often synonymous with creativity and sharper critical thinking. Especially in the professions, employers look for the candidate who is able to stand out of the crowd, who is able to impress and to look at things from a different perspective. However, when an L2 student - who naturally benefits from a different perspective - enters the university system in L2 society, it seems that everything is set up to inhibit this perspective and accelerate the student's complete integration, if not assimilation, into the receiving environment. His/her different spectrum of values and rhetorical codes is seen more as an impediment than as a valuable asset, and when these sets of non-standard conventions materialize in the student's written work, then some experts warn of negative transfer. Instead, the added value that such a component represents should be recognized and appreciated. As Casanave (2004) suggests, L2 students need to be made aware of L2-specific conventional discourse codes; however, they should also be free to make "informed choices in their own writing" (p. 48) and take the risk of moving away from these codes, if this helps better express their own voice.

Fu & Townsend (1998) maintain: "if we welcome diverse perspectives, we will invite everyone's participation in making meaning" (p. 132). I add: this would allow us to admire a wider cultural panorama and a richer array of rhetorical frontiers.

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